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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a study which examined the relationships of level and stability of self esteem to perceptual, behavioral, and motivational aspects of academic behavior among second grade students. These aspects are academic achievement, accuracy in assessing standing, and disruptive behavior. Self-esteem was assessed with the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. The instrument is composed of 80 items, to which the child responds yes or no. Subject's stability of self-esteem was assessed by a second administration of the Piers-Harris Scale four months after the first administration. To assess the accuracy of children's self-description of ability, subjects were individually interviewed and asked to rate their own reading ability in comparison with the rest of the class. Results show that (1) stability of self-esteem was found to be related to students' accuracy in rating their own reading abilities, indicating that children with stable self-esteem had realistic perceptions of their abilities; (2) both level and stability of self-esteem were found to be positively related to the students' level of achievement; and (3) both level and stability of self-esteem were found to be negatively related to disruptiveness. These results suggest that stability as well as level of self-esteem are affective dimensions related to the educational experience. (Author/MP)

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Self-Esteem and Academic Behavior Among Second Graders

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Self-Esteem and Academic Behavior
Among Second Graders

Introduction

This report is concerned with relationships between two dimensions of self-esteem, level and stability, and several aspects of academic behavior among second grade students. These aspects are academic achievement, accuracy in assessing academic standing, and disruptive behavior. In order to meaningfully address the examination of these relationships, it is necessary to discuss the theoretical framework which guided this research. This framework, coupled with empirical evidence from research in this area, allows the postulation of stability of self-esteem as an important dimension in the study of self-esteem, and leads to specific predictions regarding the relationships to be examined.

Self-Esteem and Academic Behavior
Among Second Graders

During recent years, educational research has experienced a renewal of interest in affective outcomes of the educational experience. Concomitant with this interest has been an increase in the number of studies on self-concept and self-esteem in school children. A sampling of the literature indicates that self-concept and level of self-esteem have been examined in relation to variables such as social conformity (Gergen & Bauer, 1967), responsibility for success and failure (Fitch, 1970; Marecek & Mettee, 1972; Piers, 1977; Silverman, 1964), age and sex (Bohan, 1973; Grant, 1969; Piers & Harris, 1964), ethnicity (McCormick & Karabinus, 1971), delinquency (Fitts & Hamner, 1969), and various aspects of classroom behavior (Coopersmith, 1967).

By and large, though, the primary variable of interest in relation to self-concept has been academic achievement. Level of self-esteem has been shown in numerous studies to have a positive relationship to level of academic achievement (Brookover, Thomas, & Paterson, 1964; Caplin, 1969; Gordon, 1977; McIntire & Drummond, 1977; also a review by Purkey, 1970). As pointed out in a recent review of construct validation studies of self-concept:

> The construct has potential scientific importance for interpreting achievement outcomes... Self-concept, then, whether used as an outcome itself or as a moderator variable that helps explain achievement outcomes, is a critical variable in education and in educational evaluation and research (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976, p. 408).

This conclusion seems warranted, in spite of notable differences in the definitions and measurement approaches applied to the study of self-concept and self-esteem. The major problem of this content area is the

lack of a universally agreed-upon definition of the self-concept construct. The majority of empirical studies relevant to self-concept are not reflective of any particular theory; and no one particular theory has received much systematic empirical exploration. Furthermore, in many of these studies the theoretical basis for the hypotheses being tested is either ambiguous, incomplete, or only implied by the research question (Wylie, 1974, p. 8).

Theoretical Framework

Self-concept has two dimensions which Turner (1968) has called the self-image and the self-conception. The self-image may be described as the picture one has of oneself at a given moment--the passing images which arise in the myriad of interactions which an individual experiences while playing valued social roles. Self-conception is a more enduring sense of who one is, and contains capabilities, values, goals, and aspirations. The self-conception consists of a selective organization of attributes and values formed from diverse experiences in dealing with the world at different levels and types of experience. Measurement of self-conception, then, should involve a determination of the attributes and values which an individual feels are relevant to this or her personal experience, i.e., it should involve self-description.

Given this view of self-conception, self-esteem may be defined as the evaluation of the various attributes that an individual considers to be contained in the self-conception. That is, it is a person's "self-assessments of qualities that count" (Rosenberg, 1968, p. 339). An individual's level of self-esteem will be determined by how well self-images, or behavior, match self-conception. Stability of self-esteem will be determined by the variability of the relationship between self-images and self-concept. Variability in this relationship can occur

from a variety of sources such as inconsistent feedback, uncertainty about the outcomes of interactions, situations which elicit novel behaviors, or changes in one's sources of feedback (such as arise when changing jobs or marital status). Other examples are available, but it is important to note that minor fluctuations in the self-images/self-conception relationship will not create a state of instability; only when the weight of the self-images is such that it diverges to an unworkable degree from its relationship with self-conception will instability of self-esteem occur. Probably everyone experiences phases of self-esteem instability such as can occur in the previous example of changing jobs or marital status. However, it is the contention here that for some subset of the population, instability of self-esteem is the prevailing experience, and that instability is associated with certain other characteristics. These characteristics fall under the category Turner (1968) has termed identity-directed interaction: increased consciousness of the self-images; focus directed toward others' attitudes toward oneself rather than on collaboration to accomplish a task; increased sensitivity to feedback; interpretation of communication at a deeper level than face value; and efforts to assign credit and responsibility for events.

As indicated previously, level of self-esteem has been frequently included in psychological research; however, stability of self-esteem has not thus far been extensively studied. In spite of a dearth of research in this area results of available research reports are congruent with the theoretical model proposed here, and indicate that stability of self-esteem, as well as level of self-esteem, can provide information important to other aspects of behavior.

For example, Marecek & Mettee (1972) examined the avoidance of continued success as a function of level of self-esteem, certainty of self-esteem, and responsibility for success. The authors hypothesized that differences among individuals in their certainty of self-appraisal (certainty of self-esteem is assumed to be equivalent to stability of self-esteem for purposes of this paper) could account for differences in motivational drives which cause some people to seek self-enhancement, while others seek to maintain cognitive consistency. Specifically, the authors reasoned that once an individual has acquired a stable self-appraisal, energy will be directed toward maintaining consistency in that appraisal. Thus, people who have a low, stable self-esteem will avoid success experiences while those who have high, stable self-esteem will seek them out. On the other hand, people who are uncertain of the validity of their self-appraisal, regardless of the level of that appraisal, will be motivated to seek self-enhancement, and will welcome success experiences. Further, the authors postulated that this condition will hold for self-determined success, but not for outcomes determined by luck or chance. A lucky success should not trigger consistency needs in a stable low self-esteem person, so that success in this case would be accepted. This reasoning was supported by the results of the study.

The authors contend that the certainty of self-esteem dimension was a critical feature of this study:

> In short, if the certainty dimensions had not been a variable, another equivocal high self-esteem versus low self-esteem result would have emerged. This suggests that when low self-esteem subjects are "lumped" together without regard for the certainty of their self-appraisal, reward-seeking tendencies on the part of some more than cancel out consistency tendencies on the part of others so that overall, low self-esteem subjects fail to differ from high self-esteem subjects (Marecek & Mettee, 1972, p. 105).

It can be seen that this outcome is consistent with the theoretical position presented earlier that uncertain or unstable self-esteem is associated with attempts to resolve discrepancies between self-image and self-conception in favor of self-conception, i.e., attempts at self-enhancement. Once an equilibrium between self-image and self-conception is reached, efforts will be made to maintain that state--thus consistency tendencies are associated with certain, or stable, self-evaluations.

An additional study (Brownfain, 1952) examined the stability of self-esteem as a correlate of social adjustment. The theoretical basis for this study was derived from the literature of psychotherapy; the basic postulate was that stability of self-esteem would be accompanied by feelings of comfort, freedom from tension, and overall psychological adjustment. Results indicated a positive relationship between social adjustment and stability of self-esteem. Again this prediction is consistent with the converse hypothesis that people who demonstrate instability of self-esteem will be preoccupied with identity-directed interaction and will thus be more susceptible to feedback, more sensitive, and more easily hurt or elated.

Hypotheses

This paper reports the results of a study which examined the relationships of level and stability of self-esteem to perceptual, behavioral, and motivational aspects of academic behavior. Three hypotheses, derived from the results of empirical work and from the theoretical framework presented earlier, were proposed.

The first hypothesis was concerned with the relationship between stability of self-esteem and accuracy of self-description of ability. The results of the Marecek and Mettee investigation indicated that stability of self-esteem was associated with a drive to maintain consistency, while

instability was associated with seeking of self-enhancement. It would be expected, then, that people with stable self-esteem should act in a manner consistent with their level of self-esteem, and should be able to provide accurate information about their ability level. People with unstable self-esteem, however, would be expected to be less consistent in their actions and therefore less accurate in describing their ability level. Futher, the direction of their inaccuracies should be overestimation, or self-enhancement.

The second hypothesis was concerned with the relationship between level and stability of self-esteem and achievement. As indicated previously, self-esteem and academic achievement have been found in numerous investigations to have a positive relationship. Thus, it was expected that this outcome would maintain in the present investigation: high achievement should be associated with high self-esteem and low academic achievement should be associated with low self-esteem. With regard to stability of self-esteem and academic achievement, no prior research exists which might aid in predicting the nature of such a relationship. However, the theoretical framework presented earlier leads to the prediction that persons who have unstable self-esteem are probably preoccupied with identity-directed interaction. While identity-direction is the focus, any tasks to be performed become secondary to the assessment of others' attitudes toward oneself. Given these relationships, it would be expected that people who are unstable in their self-esteem would perform less well on academic tasks than people with stable self-esteem. Thus, the prediction was made that stability of self-esteem would show a similar relationship to academic achievement as that of level of self-esteem: high achievement should be associated with stable self-esteem and low achievement should be associated with unstable self-esteem.

The final hypothesis was concerned with the relationship between level and stability of self-esteem and disruptive behavior. Almost no research literature exists which is directly relevant to this combination of variables. However, there is some evidence to suggest that people with low self-esteem tend to be more disposed toward various forms of deviance or criminality (Reckless & Dinitz, 1967; Fitts, 1972) and a negative relationship has been found between self-esteem and delinquency (Fitts & Hamner, 1969). In addition, several studies of self-esteem and social adjustment indicate that people with high self-esteem seem to be more socially effective (Fitts, 1972; Omwake, 1954; Rosenberg, 1965). If the assumption is made that social adjustment in the classroom is reflected in behavior that is cooperative and nondisruptive to the other students, then the prediction may be made that level of self-esteem will have a negative relationship with disruptiveness. That is, high self-esteem students should be less disruptive than low self-esteem students.

With regard to stability of self-esteem and disruptiveness, only the study by Brownfain (1952) bears on this issue. In this investigation, stability of self-esteem was found to be related to social adjustment, leading to the same prediciton for stability of self-esteem and disruptive behavior as that stated above for level of self-esteem. In addition, this prediction can be derived from the association between instability of self-esteem and a self-enhancement drive found by Marecek and Mettee (1972). In this case self-enhancement seeking on the part of the less stable self-esteem students might be manifested in attention-getting behaviors, in an effort to obtain positive reinforcement. The theoretical postulate that instability of self-esteem and identity-directed interaction are associated also leads to the prediction that less stable self-esteem

persons should show more behaviors aimed at eliciting feedback, i.e., should be more disruptive and less task-oriented. Because of the paucity of empirical work in this area, it was felt that the relationship between stability of self-esteem and disruptive behavior should be examined for the additional information that might be gained regarding this variable and social adjustment. It was hypothesized that stability of self-esteem, as with level of self-esteem, would be negatively related to disruptiveness.

Methods and Procedures

During the 1978-79 school year, data were collected on students in nine second-grade reading classes by the Dimensions of Classroom Instruction Project at the Research and Development Center for Teacher Education at The University of Texas. The classes were from schools in two separate districts, one a predominately white suburban district, and the other a rural district with a population which is approximately 60% Anglo, 25% Black, and 15% Mexican-American. A number of measures were taken, including reading progress, achievement scores, teacher and observer ratings on several attributes, self-esteem scores, and interviews. Only those measures relevant to this report will be described.

Self-esteem was assessed with the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers & Harris, 1969). This instrument is composed of 80 items, to which the child responds yes or no. Reliability data for this instrument indicate internal consistency values ranging from .80 to .93, while test-retest coefficients vary from .71 to .96 (Piers, 1977). Since most children in the second grade would have difficulty completing this instrument independently, great care was taken to ensure the children understood and completed each item. Children were given the test in small groups of five to eight; each test administrator read each item twice and explained any

unfamiliar words to the children. Although this instrument is called a self-concept scale, it actually assesses self-esteem, according to the preceding discussion. A level of self-esteem score for each of the students has been calculated using the scoring key supplied by the authors of the instrument. The scores can range from 0 to 80, with higher scores indicating more positive self-esteem. Since the instrument was given twice, students' self-esteem scores were calculated as an average of the scores received on each test administration.

In order to determine each subject's stability of self-esteem, a second administration of the scale took place, four months after the first administration, in five of the nine participating classes. Since this report focuses on stability as one dimension of self-esteem, the analyses to be reported will pertain only to the 108 students who completed the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale twice. The majority of these students were from the rural school described above.

Stability values were calculated for each student by determining the agreement among item responses on the two administrations of the self-esteem instrument, using Cohen's (1960) kappa coefficient. Kappa was developed as an index of agreement for nominal scales; it is an index of item agreement which actually occurred relative to that which could have occurred given the pre-and posttest values (Bishop, Fineberg, & Holland, 1975). The use of kappa results in a measure of stability that is not related to level of self-esteem ($r = -.03$). Higher kappa values indicate consistency of responding from one time to another, while lower values indicate disagreement, or instability, in responding.

The first question of interest was twofold: are students who are less stable in their self-esteem less accurate in their self-descriptions

of ability, and, are the inaccuracies in the direction of overestimation? To assess accuracy of self-description of ability, the students were individually interviewed and asked to rate their own reading ability in comparison with the rest of the class. Not all of the children could be interviewed, resulting in a reduced N of 74 for this analysis. In obtaining the ability ratings, the children were shown a vertical line of circles which they were told represented all the children in the reading class. The subjects were asked to name the best and worst reader in the class, and these names were placed next to the top and bottom circles, respectively. Then the subjects were asked to pick a circle that represented themselves. To determine accuracy, this line was divided into high, medium, and low sections, and the ratings were compared with the actual reading ability grouping level of the students--information which was supplied by the teachers in the study. Students were placed into accurate, overestimating, and underestimating groups on the basis of these comparisons. Only ten students were classified as underestimators, and were dropped from further analysis. An analysis of variance was conducted on the stability scores for the accurate and overestimating students. Results of this analysis indicated that accurate students were significantly more stable ($\bar{X}$ = .347, N = 31) than overestimating students ($\bar{X}$ = .269, N = 33), ($F = 5.41$, $df = 1,62$, $p = .02$).

The second hypothesis was concerned with the relationship of achievement to both level and stability of self-esteem. The achievement measure used in this study consisted of percentile scores on the reading section of the standardized achievement test given at the end of the school year. These scores were obtained for the 1977-78 and 1978-79 school years for each student.

The hypotheses of positive relationships between level of self-esteem and achievement, and stability of self-esteem and achievement were tested using multiple linear regression. Achievement scores were used as the criterion, and stability of self-esteem, level of self-esteem, and their interaction served as predictors. The test for an interaction of level and stability of self-esteem was not significant ($F = .9286$, $df = 1,102$, $p = .34$). Both level and stability of self-esteem were found to contribute significantly, and independently, to the prediction of achievement (level of self-esteem, $F = 9.95$, $df = 1,103$, $p = .002$; stability of self-esteem, $F = 11.83$, $df = 1,103$, $p = .001$). Means, standard deviations and the correlation coefficients for these variables are presented in Table 1. As can be seen in the table, both level and stability of self-esteem were positively related to achievement, indicating that people who are high achievers, tend to have high self-esteem and to be stable in their self-evaluation. It should be noted that an additional series of analyses which included first grade reading achievement scores as a predictor variable indicated that neither self-esteem variable was related to achievement gain.

The third question of interest was concerned with the relationship of level, and stability of self-esteem, and disruptive behavior. A measure of disruptiveness was obtained by having the teacher rate all the students in the sample on a 5-point scale, ranging from "considerably below average" to "considerably above average" in disruptiveness. Again, linear regression was used to examine these relationships, using the disruptive ratings as the criterion, and level of self-esteem, stability of self-esteem, and their interaction as predictors. The test for the interaction of level of stability of self-esteem was not significant ($F = .56$,

df = 1,103, p = .46). However, both these dimensions of self-esteem were found to contribute significantly, and independently, to the prediction of disruptiveness (level of self-esteem, F = 7.22, df = 1,104, p = .008; stability of self-esteem, F = 3.65, df = 1,104, p = .05). In this case, the relationship between level of self-esteem, and disruptiveness, as well as between stability of self-esteem and disruptiveness, was negative (see Table 1). This means that students who are more disruptive tend to have lower self-esteem and to be less stable in their self-evaluation.

Summary and Discussion

Level and stability of self-esteem were examined in relation to three components of academic behavior among second grade students. The results indicate that stability as well as level of self-esteem are affective dimensions related to the educational experience.

Stability of self-esteem was found to be related to students' accuracy in ranking their own reading ability, indicating that children with stable self-esteem had realistic perceptions of their abilities. Support for the self-enhancement seeking behavior of less stable students was found, which has possible implications for raising self-esteem within the school context. For example, if students can be identified as having unstable self-esteem, efforts at raising their self-esteem will be aided by the self-enhancement seeking behavior of the students.

With regard to academic achievement, both level and stability of self-esteem were found to be positively related to level of achievement. This result, for level of self-esteem, is consistent with the literature in this area. A similar finding for stability of self-esteem and achievement indicates support for the theoretical postulate that people with unstable self-esteem are likely to be preoccupied with identity-directed interaction.

While identity-direction is the focus, any tasks to be performed become secondary to the assessments of others' attitude toward oneself--a focus that is likely to lower achievement. In addition, it is possible that people who are stable in their self-evaluation are more confident when taking standardized achievement tests and will make their responses without undue hesitation. Unstable students may be uncertain about their responses and will take longer to make a response, or will change their answers, behavior which would lower scores on timed standardized achievement tests. This finding requires further investigation before a theoretical interpretation can be made with any degree of certainty.

Finally, both level and stability of self-esteem were found to be negatively related to disruptiveness. This indicates that students who receive higher disruptiveness ratings by their teachers tend to have lower self-esteem, an outcome which is congruent with related findings. Students who are more disruptive are also less stable in their self-esteem, which might be indicative of self-enhancement seeking (attention getting) behaviors. These behaviors presumably would be aimed at eliciting feedback in an effort to gain information about the self--one symptom of identity-directed interaction. Again, these findings warrant further investigation before a confident interpretation can be forwarded.

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Table 1

	Mean	Standard Deviation	R	
Achievement	52.92	31.36	1.00	
Level of Self-Esteem	59.67	10.16	.272**	
Stability of Self-Esteem	.3114	.16	.298**	N=106
Disruptiveness	2.40	1.30	1.00	
Level of Self-Esteem	59.61	10.14	-.246**	
Stability of Self-Esteem	.31	.16	-.171*	N=107

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$